DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 092 979 CS 201 421

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TITLE Literature and Writing.
PUB DATE May 74
NOTE 4p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (19th, New Orleans, May 1-4, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Interests; *Classroom Communication; *Creative Writing; Group Discussion; *Interaction; Language Development; *Literature Appreciation; Reading Interests

ABSTRACT

Classroom interaction, both student-teacher and student-student, provides a stimulating atmosphere for literature and creative writing discussions. Various recent research studies support the thesis that literature is an important influence on children's creative writing. Thus, teacher directed discussions require special skills involving not only the art of questioning, but also indirect behaviors such as the acceptance of children's feelings, the encouragement of their reading and writing activities, and the development of children's ideas. Through such sensitive approaches to classroom discussions, children's language development may be encouraged. (JM)

ED 092979

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The International Reading Association
Thursday, May 2, 1974
Symposium XIII

Effective Teaching of the Communication Skills: A Symposium in Cooperation with the National Conference on Research in English

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"Literature and Writing"

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Children's Literature and Creative Writing are areas with much potential for classroom interaction, although they are quite personal activities in themselves. They are communication activities, and, as such, evoke-through children's responses to them-more interaction than just the reader-writer exchange. It seems logical to discuss literature and writing together, as children's literature is someone's creative writing, and creative writing or composing helps children experience firsthand what happens in literature. The elements involved are the same.

It is generally accepted -- and research is beginning to support the belief -- that literature is an important influence on children's creative writing. Everts (1967), Sebesta (1967), and Thompson (1967) reported on the interrelationships of composition and literature in the elementary grades. Pinkham (1969) found that a model of literature approach (in which creative writing was encouraged by hearing, discussing, and evaluating selected works from the field of children's literature) was to some extent instrumental in improving ability in written expression in fifth grade pupils, especially in the case of urban children. Pinkham suggested an inquiry approach based on questions developed from literature. Lyman Hunt (n.d.) advised that the key to a good conference about reading lies in the questioning.

Teachers need special skills in the art of questioning -- both in regard to literature and to creative writing. For

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example, in discussing a child's writing, the teacher can help the child improve in organization, clarity, or word choice by appropriate questions, such as, "What did you mean here?" or "What happened after that?"

In addition to questioning skills, other behaviors needed by teachers in guiding children's development in the area of literature and writing include:

Accepting feelings. This is very important, yet often seems very difficult for teachers to do. When a child writes his innermost thoughts and feelings, the teacher's response is very important indeed.

Praising or encouraging. Encouragement, as positive reinforcement for reading or writing activities, is also a much-needed teaching behavior. However, praise is more helpful when it is specific, rather than general. A general "good" may become automatic and not very significant to the child, while a specific, "I liked the ending of your story; I liked the way you worked out the problem," actually gives needed feedback.

Accepting or using ideas of students. Clarifying and developing ideas are useful behaviors in conferences, whether group or individual.

All of these behaviors mentioned are more indirect than direct, and, of course, there is a place for direct behavior, too. The indirect ones are stressed more here, because I suspect they are usually more neglected in classrooms. The use of interaction scales can help teachers become aware of their own repertoire of behaviors and encourage them to be indirect at times as well as direct.

Indirect behaviors seem especially helpful in promoting growth in understanding literature and skill in writing. One

study by Biberstine (1967) showed that better writing students in fourth grade tended to see their teachers as being easy-going, pleasant, kind, clear, friendly, and soft. Accepting, praising, interested questioning, and using children's ideas seem to be behaviors that indicate pleasant, kind, friendly teachers.

Finally, more child-child interaction is recommended, not just teacher-child. Beeker (1970) found that class discussions did not seem to result in improved writing, but that verbalization of one's own ideas is more conducive to mature writing than is listening to others' ideas. Beeker recommended more paired-student oral activity in order to give the individual child more talking time. Paired-student discussion and sharing of literature is also good, for children respond to peer reactions to literature. They learn much from each other.

If children's suggestions and opinions are valued, then there will be more child-initiated talk. If we as educators truly want to encourage children's language development, then we will welcome more child-initiated talk and more child-child interaction.

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